

3 Beauty and Adventure Out Your Backdoor: *A Place for Fun and Reflection*

Have you ever been pleasantly surprised when you wandered into the woods and found trilliums and woodland lilies growing in the understory? Or felt tensions fade as you cross-country skied through an evergreen forest during the winter?

There is increasing scientific evidence that frequent visits to natural areas makes us happier and healthier, even when those visits are brief. A walking trail, woodland flower gardens, or a wildlife viewing point can be developed on less than an acre, so whether quiet beauty or vigorous exercise is your preference, you can create a stress free

zone right outside your back door.

Creating a Colorful Edge Between the Backyard and the Woods

A colorful woodland edge area between your yard and the woods beyond can do double duty by attracting wildlife and providing year-round beauty. The red fruit of winterberry bushes in January and the white blooms of shadbush in June, for example, are attractive native species that also provide food for many birds.

To increase color in fall and winter, consider planting some evergreens if you have mostly hardwoods on your property. If you



Woodland Structures - edge features

have mostly evergreens, consider planting hardwood trees like maple, beech, and paper birch in sunny areas. Yellow beech leaves in autumn contrasted against purple asters and red maples will provide a display of late season color that rivals the floral displays of spring. The red berries of winterberry add color to the midwinter landscape. Not all species grow well in every location, however, so consider the soil type and other features on your property before you decide what to plant. Soil information is available free from your county Natural Resources Conservation Service office. Guides to landscaping, wildlife habitat improvement, and shade gardening will help in planning. Local garden centers and specialty seed companies are also helpful resources.

Your Backyard: A Clearing in the Woods

Your lawn is really a clearing in the forest that will eventually fill in with trees if

you quit mowing. You probably want to keep your lawn, but you might consider the value of planting select trees, shrubs, and flowering plants to add color and structural and seasonal variety to your property.

Planting trees and shrubs in your yard has many benefits, including reducing noise and dust from traffic, blocking harsh winds and drifting winter snow, providing a cooling effect in summer, reducing soil erosion and increasing water quality. If you decide to sell your property, your landscaping efforts will probably pay off in higher real estate values even though your real estate taxes probably won't be affected by the improvement.

Use native species in designing a backyard landscape that showcases plants, bushes, and small trees that flower in succession from early spring until fall. Culinary herbs like thyme and mint also work easily into landscape designs, but avoid planting



Woodland Shade Garden

species like purple loosestrife and barberry, which are not native to the state and can easily out-compete native plants that provide food for many types of wildlife.

Many flowering plants that attract butterflies and hummingbirds also add to the beauty in your backyard. These fragile wildlife species are very sensitive to environmental change created by the use of pesticides and herbicides; it is best to avoid using them. See the resource list for publications on backyard conservation and backyard habitat for more information.

A Wild Garden in the Woods

Whether you own 1/10 of an acre or ten acres, a woodland wildflower garden is within your reach.

Wildflowers have a reputation for being fussy. Some wildflowers are difficult to grow, while others can tolerate a wide range of conditions. Many can be grown successfully by anyone willing to spend a little time in planning. The same considerations apply to wild plants that apply to cultivated varieties: it is important to know the sunlight, soil requirements, and the length of the growing season for each species.

It is best to buy wildflower seeds or seedlings from a nursery. If you decide to collect wildflower seeds and cultivate your own seedlings, be sure to collect only a few seeds from each area so existing plants can continue to propagate. Avoid transplanting wild plants altogether. Many wildflowers do not transplant well and up to 80% of transplants die the first year. There is also the chance you may plunder wild growing plants of singular ecological importance to a specific area. In fact, some wild flowering herbs are fast becoming rare due to unrestrained harvesting.

Semi-shade tolerant flowering trees like mountain laurel and witch hazel can help vary the vertical structure of your woodland garden by creating an eye level attraction

between the ground level view on the forest floor and the overhead view. Clumps of ferns and clusters of semi-shade tolerant bushes or evergreens in the understory also create pleasing structural variety.

Once established, woodland shade gardens become a source of pleasure year after year without requiring much maintenance. Carpets of colorful wildflowers like hepatica bloom in the understory of hardwood trees in the early spring, then give way to small flowering trees like mountain laurel and the variegated leaves of different shades of green, pale white, and silver during mid-summer. Late summer and fall bring bright fruits and colorful foliage. Witch hazel bears delicate yellow blooms late into the fall. And winter brings the red twigs of the osier dogwood, the enduring evergreens, and the delicate silhouettes of paper birch and other hardwoods.



Ruffed Grouse are secretive year-round residents of Maine

Viewing Wildlife

Wildlife viewing spots can easily be integrated into woodland gardens or trail design. This can be as simple as hanging a bird nesting box at the edge of the backyard or a more complicated project like constructing a boardwalk over a small wetland in order to view singing frogs, salamanders, and birds. Some wildlife — such as frogs, butterflies, and robins — can go on with their daily rituals without being too dis-



A Scenic Pine - Oak Woodland

turbed by your presence. Others require distance and a sense of safety before they will choose to nest or den in a certain area and may abandon their attempts to raise a family if disturbed. See *The Woods In Your Backyard: Home Improvement for Wildlife* for more information and a resource list on wildlife habits and habitats.

If you know of certain areas where wildlife gather, consider building a natural “blind” of pole sticks and brush in order to view the area through sight-holes without disturbing the animals. Blinds are useful for both bird watching and wildlife photography.

Creating Scenic Views

Sometimes landowners remove all underbrush, rotting logs, and dead lower tree limbs in order to encourage an open “park-like” look in their woods. While this practice may make the woods look “tidy”, it discourages many kinds of birds and other wildlife, since it removes cover that is an essential part of their habitat requirements.

It also decreases the amount of nutrients available to return to the soil, which, in turn, may eventually affect the health and beauty of the trees the landowner wants to enhance.

One option is to leave dead logs and some understory vegetation. Another is to clear the understory in a narrow strip, instead of clearing the understory over a large area. Clearing the understory of a white birch stand can enhance the beauty of the birches, for example, while the adjacent woods remain a wilder tangle that is more attractive to wildlife. Clearing the understory of a small area, while leaving the surrounding woods with a more complex understory, also provides a sense of privacy and refuge on a small property. By leaving the canopy above, there is also little need for the continued maintenance necessary to keep a new woodland clearing from becoming filled with the new growth that sprouts up in full sunlight. The shade keeps the competition down. Proper pruning tech-

niques for the mature trees will help keep them healthy.

Many factors will determine the healthiest and most scenic options for your woodland, including the size of your property, soil type, drainage and cost.

A Path Through the Woods: Creating Trails

With a little planning, a simple walking or cross country ski trail requires less than a day a year to build and maintain. A curving loop trail that takes advantage of varying terrain created by natural features such as dips, slopes, and rocky outcroppings will allow you easy access to your woods. Even a loop trail on a property as small as a quarter of an acre can provide a quick getaway to watch birds or walk the family dog, or be integrated into a landscape design. A trail designed to pass fern gardens, mossy boulders, and other natural areas of scenic interest also offers intimate views of seasonal change and the opportunity to view wildlife out your back door.

If your property is adjacent to property with existing trails, or is a piece of a larger woodland, your neighbors may be interested in helping create a longer community trail for use by participating landowners. See *The Woods In Your Backyard: Neighborly and Family Relations* for more information about community trails.

Interpretive nature trails with numbered stops along the way and a companion trail guide are an excellent way to get scout troops or youth groups involved and personally invested in trail design and maintenance. Picking interpretive stops that change seasonally will keep the interest of those who travel the trail regularly. Safe snag trees, vernal pools, woodland edges, streams, and simple historic features like stone walls or old cellar holes are a few good choices for interpretation.

You need not travel far for beauty and

adventure in the woods of Maine. With some planning and little effort, both are just a few steps away.

RESOURCES

Woodland Landscaping

Brookes, John. 1998. *Natural Landscapes*. This book discusses planting a natural garden, using plants in their natural environments and creating walkways and waterways on your property. DK Publishing. \$29.95. Order through bookstores.

Collins, John F., et al. 1988. *Livable Landscape Design*. A workbook to help homeowners or professionals successfully apply basic design principles. Includes practical information about plant materials, paving, landscape structures, walls, fences, containers, and lighting. Cornell Cooperative Extension. 64 pp. Information Bulletin # 211. \$12.00. To order: 607-255-2080 or the Internet at <http://www.cce.cornell.edu/publications/gardening.html>

Gardening to Conserve Maine's Native Landscape: Plants to Use and Plants to Avoid. A comprehensive list of native flowering plants, trees, shrubs, vines, and ferns recommended for landscaping, along with their requirements for moisture and shade. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Bulletin # 2500. Free. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

Jones, Geoffrey T. 1993. *A Guide To Logging Aesthetics: Practical Tips for Loggers, Foresters and Landowners*. Fifty color photographs and text describe cost-effective and proven practices that minimize negative impacts during and immediately after the harvest while enhancing the wildlife, recreational, and aesthetic qualities of the woodlot. Cornell Cooperative Extension. 27 pp. Bulletin #123NRAES60. \$7.00. To order: 607-255-2080 or the Internet at <http://www.cce.cornell.edu/publications/natural-resources.html>

Verner, Yvette. *The Blooming Lawn: Creating a Flower Meadow*. 160 pp. \$17.95. To order: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., P.O. Box 428, White River Junction, VT 05001 or 800-639-4099. Internet site at <http://www.chelseagreen.com>

Wild Garden: Your Resource for Gardening with Native Plants and for Wildlife. The only magazine devoted entirely to gardening with native plants for beauty and for wildlife habitat improvement. Extensive resource lists, gardening design, and practical tips. \$23.95 for 6 quarterly issues. To contact: 877-NATIVE-2 (toll-free) or e-mail at circ@wild-garden.com

Butterfly Gardening

Butterfly Gardening. University of Minnesota Cooperative Extension. \$7.00. To order: 800-876-8636 or the Internet at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/documents/d/g/dg6711.html>

Stack, Lois Berg. *Landscaping for Butterflies and Moths*. Lists nectar sources for butterflies and moths. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

Sources for Native Plants and Seeds

Fieldstone Gardens, Inc. Lists hundreds of northern-grown perennials and native wildflowers of the New England region. Excellent choices for both sun and shade. Mail order available. Contact: Fieldstone Gardens, Inc., 620 Quaker Lane, Vassalboro, ME 04989-9713 or 207-923-3836.

Johnny's Selected Seeds. Offers native varieties that are especially adapted to increase color variety and cold weather hardiness. Johnny's Selected Seeds, 222 Foss Hill Road, Albion, ME 04910-9731 or 207-437-4301. Internet site at <http://www.johnnyseeds.com>

New England Wildflower Society/Garden in the Woods. Sells native plants through their retail

store from April 15-October 31. Also sells seeds and books through mail order. A catalog is available each January for \$2.50. To order: New England Wildflower Society/Garden in the Woods, 180 Hemenway Road, Framingham, MA 01701-2699 or 508-877-7630. Internet site at <http://www.newfs.org>

Avena Institute. A non-profit botanical organization that offers a wide variety of classes on gardening, ecological stewardship and health — including a class on organic gardening of medicinal herbs. The institute grows its own herbs and sells herbal remedies. A native woodland plant restoration project is underway in their gardens, which are open to the public every Wednesday from 1:00-4:00 p.m. from mid-June through mid-October. Contact: Avena Institute, 219 Mill Street, Rockport, ME 04856 or 207-594-0694.

Nature Trails

Fazio, James. 1983. *Nature Trails: Guides to Environmental Understanding*. Suggests locations for nature trails, what to look for and an overall concept for a trail. Cornell Cooperative Extension. 4-H Leaders' Guide L-5-4. #147L54. \$2.25. To order: 607-255-2080.

National Park Service. 1996. *Conservation Works*. A booklet on creating trails, enhancing waterways and developing open spaces in towns and cities. The Androscoggin Greenways are used as an example. Internet site at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/rtca/rtc/rtcahome.html>

Pine Tree State Arboretum. 1997. *Self-Guided Tour: Pine Tree State Arboretum Outdoor Education Center*. (Brochure). A good trail brochure to use as an example for creating your own nature trail guide. Contact: 207-621-0031.

Thorp, Mary. *Mackworth Island, Human Influence on a Coastal Island: A Self-Guiding Trail Brochure*. Bureau of Public Lands, Maine Department of Conservation. (Brochure).

A good example of an interpretive trail guide. Contact: Maine Bureau of Public Lands, State House Station 22, Augusta, ME 04330 or 207-287-3061.

Fun in the Woods

Duensing. *Talking to Fireflies, Shrinking the Moon: Nature Activities for All Ages*. Forty fun activities designed for kids ages six to a hundred, from how to hypnotize a bullfrog to weave a daisy chain. Clear instructions with illustrations. \$13.55. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#EE-6124). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Nursery Nature Walks. *Trails, Tails & Tidepools in Pails: Over 100 Nature Activities for Families with Babies and Young Children*. Filled with fun activities for parents with pre-schoolers. \$9.30. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#PRE-741). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Burt. *Plant Identification Card Deck (Eastern Edition)* A fun photographic reference for identifying common edible and poisonous plants. Each card has detailed information on the plant, its habitat and uses. 52 cards. \$7.95. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#BP-6384). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>



Creating a Woodland Wildflower Sanctuary

Planning a Woodland Garden

Creating a woodland wildflower garden or fern garden is similar to creating a flower garden in your yard, except it takes more time to get it started and requires less yearly maintenance once it is established. A woodland garden can be created beneath a canopy of tall trees, in a sunny gap in the middle of the woods, or at the edge of the lawn.

In the first case, you have a shade garden with light filtering through the canopy to the forest floor. In the second, you have a gap where full sun will be available part of the day. In the third case, sun will probably be available a large part of the day.

Either way, a magnificent garden that takes advantage of native plants can be created on less than 1/10 acre, and, if well planned, give the sense of a much larger area that is privately tucked away. It's a good idea to stay flexible when planning, though, since soil nutrient and moisture conditions influence what plants do well in a given location.

This is a good long-term family project. Get everyone involved by having each family member design and tend one small piece of the garden, thus creating a designer woodland garden that represents the personalities and tastes of the entire family.

GETTING READY

1. Review the rough map you created in *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Land* and *#2: A Wildlife Safari in Your Woods*. (Didn't do it? Consider going back and starting there).
2. Walk your land and look for natural trails, colorful trees, or areas on your property that already have a natural charm, like a group of boulders or an area with moss and ferns. Find places of particular interest and let them guide your decision making about where to concentrate your gardening efforts.
3. Identify plants, trees, shrubs, wildflowers and ferns already growing in these locations.
4. See the resources list on backyard habitat and creating woodland gardens for background reading on the subject.
5. Decide how much time you want to spend on the woodland garden before you begin. This will determine how big an area to concentrate on. You can always expand the garden next year if you decide to make it bigger.

TOOLS

- Enlarged copy of map created in *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Woods* and *#2: A Wildlife Safari in Your Woods* (optional).
- Notebook.
- Pencil or pen.
- Tree/shrub identification book.
- Flower identification book.

DOING THE ACTIVITY

Time Frame: This will vary considerably depending on the size of the garden and how much soil preparation is necessary. Assume you will need several weekend days to establish the garden and occasional maintenance after that. Planning is a good winter activity.

1. Locate the area you wish to garden. It may have a centerpiece like a small stream, a moss covered boulder, a flowering tree, or a natural alcove for a stone bench.
2. Make several trips out to the area to identify trees, shrubs and flowers. Keep notes of what you identify in your journal and add the location of each new item to a map.
3. While you are out in the woods, note on your map where the different heights and colors naturally vary the structure and beauty of the site. Sketch in where different bed sites could go around these existing features, noting what heights or colors might accentuate them.
4. Rake (*or flag*) clear a curving trail (*possibly a loop trail*) through the area to get an idea what it would look like with flowers around it. Does the trail take advantage of the dips and curves in the terrain? Is it placed so it shows the landscape to good advantage? If you decide you don't like the trail location, rake the leaves and twigs back in and try another place.
5. Once you pick a site, you may choose to put in loosely defined beds until the woodland garden is established. The wildflowers and plants will blend in over time, creating a natural look, but it is a good idea to stake the corners of your beds while doing site preparation. Soil and bed preparation will pay off later when the woods are full of flowers and maintenance is minimal, so keep that in mind if it seems like a lot of work up front.
6. Take a soil sample and send it for an analysis to find out what will grow well at that site. (*See Backyard Family Project #6: Getting Down and Dirty with Your Kids for directions on taking a soil sample*).
7. After reading resource material and scouting your site, develop a written plan of action for the next year in your journal. For example, a good guideline is to prepare the site for shrubs and understory trees, order them and plant them soon after they arrive. Sites for flowering plants or other more delicate plants can be established later. Creating the woodland garden in steps will help the garden become well established, provide you with many enjoyable hours out in your woods while keeping the project from becoming daunting.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

Wildlife Habitat

Woodland gardening can be beautifully combined with wildlife habitat improvement to create your own special retreat and provide food, water, cover, and room for birds, turtles, salamanders, and perhaps larger animals, too.

Nature Trail

A nature trail is a great follow-up to establishing a woodland garden. It can be as simple as planning a trail so that it passes certain features such as stone walls where a short tailed weasel lives, or a snag with woodpecker holes. With a little proper pruning, it doesn't take much to open up a simple path. Scouts, youth, or school groups might also want to work together to write and illustrate a simple nature trail guide.